

# Heartland Rock

By PETER EISENHAUER

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Proud yet realistic about their rural roots, down-to-earth songwriters have given the United States music to celebrate everyday life.

To be born and raised in rural and small town America is to grow up with a strong sense of belonging. You know your neighbors, your schoolmates, the people at the local stores. Becoming more aware of the larger world, however, you begin to sense a great distance from the centers of power, of financial and cultural influence in America. You learn that in the big city, “small town” is used as a term meaning inferior or second rate. The more ambitious youths plan their escape from the

confines of their home communities to the big city, where they can make it. Reflecting this attitude, cartoonist Doug Marlette had his character Kudzu famously remark about his mythical, rural hometown, “It’s a good place to be *from*. The sooner the better.”

At the same time, this small town, rural landscape is known as the heartland of the United States, suggesting that this is the real America, where people are down-to-earth, unaffected, honest and honorable. The people who live there are proud of

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RURAL MUSIC



## Born in the Heartland

Growing up in a small town in the Midwest meant playing every summer day outdoors, coming in after dark only when your mother called for you. It meant snowball fights and making snowmen in the winter. In the fall, it meant raking leaves all day into piles and then running and jumping in them. And in the spring, it meant waiting for the last huge chunk of ice to melt on the driveway under the basketball hoop so you would not fall down playing “horse!”

It meant running through backyards with no fences, riding your bike everywhere in town, your dog following you to school and waiting for you when you got out. It meant family picnics in the field at the old Mulford farm, throwing dirt balls into the stream and standing barefoot in the ice cold spring water where the watercress grew.

It meant doing everything as a family, from eating meals together to shoveling snow, from playing baseball to spring-cleaning the house, from taking family vacations in northern Wisconsin to replacing the storm windows with screens in summer.

It meant hard work and happiness, but most of all, it meant freedom.

—Ambassador David C. Mulford, born in Rockford, Illinois



Hemant Bhatnagar

this, even as they experience difficulties and frustrations.

Many of these feelings found expression in a style of rock music that emerged in the late 1970s. In contrast to many of the popular groups of the era, the artists who played “heartland rock” were not theatrical. Instead of elaborate stage-sets and costumes, they came out in T-shirts and jeans; instead of synthesizers and programmed electronic percussion, they brought out guitars and backed up their songs with a strong beat from a traditional rock drum kit. In their personal lives, too, these artists tended to stay or return to their home communities, rather than living a glamorous lifestyle in New York or Los Angeles.

According to the All Music Guide ([www.allmusic.com/](http://www.allmusic.com/)), a database of music, “At its core, heartland rock was straightforward rock ‘n’ roll infused with Americana—more streamlined than garage rock, but not as traditionalist as roots rock.”

The All Music Guide also notes that work in this style, “was united by the attitude that music should be about something.”

What it is about is the lives, dreams and disappointments of ordinary working people, usually those in rural areas. An entry

in the online encyclopedia Wikipedia says the theme of isolation is central to heartland rock.

This can be seen in the songs of the most prominent rockers in this style: Bruce Springsteen, Tom Petty, John Mellencamp and Bob Seger. Many of Springsteen’s songs, like “Promised Land,” speak bitterly of the broken promise of America. His song “Born in the U.S.A.” has a refrain that sounds like a proud patriotic anthem. Yet, the verses describe the pain of a returned war veteran finding it hard to make his way in life back home. In “Night Moves,” Bob Seger sings of the yearning of young lovers and romantic encounters “out past the corn

Ambassador David C. Mulford and his wife, Jeannie, at Roosevelt House with their silk-screen color print by Italian artist Nicola Simbari. It depicts a typical American Midwest scene—a young girl riding her bike in the backyard, with sheets drying on the clothesline. The Ambassador says the picture makes him think of his wife as a child growing up in the small town of Hastings in Nebraska.

fields where the woods get heavy.” “Look at the stars,” he sings in another song, “they’re so far away.”

Mellencamp was born in the state of Indiana in a town called Seymour. It was founded in the mid-1800s at the intersection of two railroads on the Great Plains.



Willie Nelson (left) and Neil Young at the 21st annual Farm Aid concert in Camden, New Jersey, in 2006.

PAUL NATKIN/Photo Reserve Inc. 2006

Mellencamp began his career with a local band, then got an opportunity to make it big time in 1976, when he was signed to a recording deal by the manager of British singer David Bowie—the artist who personified stagey “glam rock.” Mellencamp was given the name “Johnny Cougar” and an image reminiscent of the film star James Dean. The strategy did not work, and Mellencamp returned to Indiana, began recording albums of his own compositions and toured incessantly with his band. In 1982, his album “American Fool” topped the charts. The album included the hit single “Jack & Diane,” about “two American kids, from the heartland,” dreaming the dreams of youth: “Jack, he’s going to be a football star....” When Jack says “we ought to run off to the city,” Diane says, “You ain’t missing a thing.” The song’s refrain warns that “life goes on, long after the thrill of living is gone.”

Mellencamp uses scenes from his hometown of Seymour in the video version of the song “Small Town” from his 1985 album, “Scarecrow.” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3eDkAG3R0h8>). “Small Town” is a somewhat ironic celebration of the heartland:

*All my friends are so small town.  
My parents live in the same small town.  
My job is so small town,  
Provides little opportunity.*

Not that the singer himself can’t make it in the big city—he can—after all, he has “married an L.A. doll,” but brought her back from Los Angeles to be “small-town, just like me.”

The video opens with a series of photos in black and white—an older couple proudly sitting out on their land. The main street of the town with the first automobiles, family portraits of farmers, young men in army uniform, a young couple outside a newly purchased house, then home movies of children playing, photos of Mellencamp himself playing ball, posing with his first rock band, relaxing with friends and family at home in modest surroundings. There’s a nostalgic feeling to all the photos—particularly the brick facades of the main street shops, built in the first flush of the prosperity of Seymour. Downtowns of communities

*John Mellencamp sings “Small Town” before a football game in Indianapolis, capital of his home state, Indiana, in September, 2007.*

like Seymour, while often still well-maintained, are now often abandoned for the shopping malls that have grown up on the outskirts of the towns.

Responding to the economic stresses on farmers and small communities, Mellencamp joined with Neil Young and country and rock singer Willie Nelson in 1985 to found FarmAid ([www.farmaid.org](http://www.farmaid.org)), a non-profit organization whose mission is to keep family farmers on their land.

The plan was to hold just one concert, distribute aid, raise awareness and see success. Two decades later, however, the United States is still losing hundreds of family farms, and small towns are losing their young to the big cities, so Farm Aid holds concerts almost every year. It raises money to connect farmers to credit and information and promotes the value of wholesome food grown on family plots.

“There is an on-going need for the kinds of help Farm Aid provides,” Mellencamp told reporters before a 2001 concert in his home state, Indiana. We all see what’s happening with agriculture, what’s happening to our small towns. They are going out of business.”

But the love of the dream is still there. According to author Timothy E. Scheurer, in his book “*Born in the U.S.A.—The Myth of America in Popular Music from Colonial Times to the Present*,” Mellencamp, Springsteen and others have “alluded to the small town of the past as a place where community, people, freedom and opportunity still can be found.” As Mellencamp sings:

*No I cannot forget where it is that I come from.  
I cannot forget the people who love me.  
Yeah, I can be myself here in this small town.  
And people let me be just what I want to be.*



A.J. MAST © AP/WIDEWORLD

Scheurer notes that the songwriters may be “calling for a return to a condition which can never be, if it ever was.” Still, the “myth of America,” Scheurer writes, is “a deathless song....It haunts us, it inspires our anger, our hope, our distrust, our longing, our greatness and our shame....This is a country where everyone should enjoy the blessings of freedom, equality and opportunity; this is a country blessed with a bountiful natural landscape; and this is a country that needs to continue the quest to find itself, to find a true moral vision, to fulfill its revolutionary destiny, and to be a place where it really means something when we sing “Born in the U.S.A.”



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**Peter Eisenhauer**, the first secretary for cultural affairs at the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi, is from West Bend, a small town in Wisconsin. He has also played in rock bands.